



Article by Etnia Nativa

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Earthy homes, lasting charm, and sustainable living

Episode CCXCII -292

The narrative shared through Etnia Nativa emphasizes the importance of reclaiming and recognizing the island's cultural roots and heritage, which have often been overshadowed by colonial history. The platform actively engages in promoting the value of rediscovering native traditions, history and identities, while highlighting the importance of moving beyond colonial influences.

In this episode we will share a little bit about the traditional mud houses as sustainable buildings. Around the world, people are returning to this overlooked, age-old construction material since mud buildings are perfect at keeping us cool in summer and warm in winter, and withstanding extreme weather.

This type of building was practiced throughout native America and in Aruba this method is known as "cas di torto", or "cas di lodo", meaning mud house, a traditional construction style made out of grass, water and clay, also called adobe.

The technique is an amalgam of traditional Caquetian dwellings and new world architecture. A similar method was practiced in Paraguaná, a Venezuelan peninsula on the opposite side of our island, during the 18th century, where it is known as "bajareque". It is Spanish, probably a word of Caribbean Taino origin. Although it was first used by indigenous groups, it was also the primary choice of European colonizers, who knew how to take advantage of a diverse selection of native materials and techniques. Many of these houses were built by the less fortunate on our island until 1925. Since then, this construction method has fallen into disuse.

Construction began by forming the skeleton of what would become the house, using wooden posts placed at intervals of half a meter. A framework of branches is placed in between. Then covered by earth, water mixed with grass fibers, like dry corn stalks, Panicum



varieties or other available natural fibers that help bond the clay mixture. Later, when introduced also Aloe Vera juice where spread over the clay mixture. This gave it additional strength and offered protection from the elements.

For the roof, strips of cactus wood were placed on the posts and beams where clay was put on top. At first the roof covering consisted of corn stalks; later it was replaced by the heart of the columnar cactus (Cereus). The floor was made of clay mixed with lime cement or cow dung.

In the rest of indigenous America, roofs were built with protective gabled covers, made of palm leaves forming partitions and walls with a mat formwork filled with a mortar of plant origin compacted by pounding with a tamper. This was also used for internal furniture made entirely of available materials. In Aruba, the "torto" houses were generally divided into a kitchen, a living room, a terrace and a bedroom. In the kitchen there was a wooden or metal barrel to store water, which was taken from the rain ponds. For this reason, a thick clay wall was built. These houses were often home to large families and people slept on mats on the floor.

While this construction technique was first used by indigenous groups, later, many of the mud houses were replaced by stone houses. It can be combined with rammed earth, ado-

be and brick or stone bases and subgrades, in order to give greater durability to the structure.

We need to rethink whether to return to build with mud, modernizing old techniques which could be part of the solution to mitigate the consequences of climate change. The breathable nature of mud allows moisture to enter the house, improving indoor air quality and preventing the build-up of moisture and mold that cement traps and incubates.

Mud walls have a high thermal mass, meaning they slowly absorb heat from solar radiation and store it, releasing it at night when temperatures are cooler – which is a solution in tropical climates, reducing the constant use of air conditioning. □

If you enjoyed reading our stories and are interested in learning more regarding the true identity of Aruba, we recommend you to book a visit to Etnia Nativa—the only "living museum of its kind in the Caribbean"—a fascinating choice, a trend setter since 1994 as co-founder of Arikock National Park, Archaeological Museum and Artisan Foundation among others. Etnia Nativa shares valuable knowledge and connects you to the ancient island's spirit and soul.

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